

Gilbert Ryle's Last Letter to Dennett

When I was preparing "Re-introducing *The Concept of Mind*" for the new Penguin edition, I spent some happy hours rummaging around in the past, hoping to confirm or correct or heighten my recollections of Ryle, some of which strike *me* as almost incredible from today's vantage point. I found enough material to strengthen my resolve to write up some reminiscences some day - but not yet. For the time being, I will pass on just one item: the last (and by far the best) letter Ryle wrote to me after I left Oxford in 1965. I had returned to Oxford in 1968 for a Michaelmas Term of sabbatical, the last time I saw Ryle, but we had kept up a very desultory correspondence, largely concerned with life's adjustments (his retirement, my children, my move to the East Coast) rather than philosophy. In 1969 I had sent him the very first copy of *Content and Consciousness* (which was a revision of my dissertation), but I deliberately avoided sending him papers of mine while he was still Editor of *Mind* because I didn't want to put him on the spot. He edited the journal autocratically, reading *all* the submissions and making most decisions regarding publication without consulting anybody, and I didn't want him to think I was fishing for a queue-jumping publication in *Mind*, something he often provided to perish-fearing untenured Americans. By the time of this last letter--1976, some eight months before his death on the 6th of October - we had finally managed the unheralded transition from "Dear Dennett" and "yrs, Ryle" - easy for him - and "Dear Professor Ryle" via "Dear Ryle" to "Dear Gilbert" - something I could just barely bring myself to write. My letters, young Yank that I was, were always typed, and his, of course, were written in longhand. While transcribing his minuscule but elegant hand for my own ease of re-reading, and now for yours, I found myself wondering what we've lost in this age of word-processing (to say nothing of email). The pace of reading enforced by longhand imposes time for reflection that, at least in my case, has often been put to good use. Ryle's many parentheses enforce a slow reading even in this user-false-friendly format, in any case, so take your time and enjoy it.

Daniel Dennett
September 4, 1999

N.B. This letter appears with permission from The Principal, Fellows and Scholars of Hertford College in The University of Oxford.

Ryle's last letter to me:

22.2.76 ISLIP Oxon [some eight months before his death, October 6]

Dear Dan,

I was much pleased to hear from you, about Susan, the family & yourself. Incidentally the above address is enough. The village of Islip is served by a single post-lady ('post-person' I suppose in Women's Lib-ese) & she needs and gets no light from reading

on an envelop the name of my house or street. The 'OXON' does matter, though, since there is another Islip in England, not to speak of yours in Long Island. (But Magd College is OK too).

1. I thought well of your Fodor-review [just then submitted to *Mind*, then under Hamlyn's editorship]; but for reasons that I've forgotten, I'm anti-Fodor. But your review leaves me wondering 1) what on earth these 'representations' are supposed to be and do. Do I have them? Do I need them? Is their extension identical with that of Locke's less pompous 'ideas'? 2) What does 'internal' mean? Locke's usual 'inner'? If I run through the Greek alphabet a) in a sing-song; b) muttered; c) under my breath; d) merely 'in my head', is only d) properly 'internal'? So when I mutter or intone 'kappa' audibly is this noise *not* a 'representation' of an item in the Greek alphabet? (On p13 [of the typescript] we hear about 'representations of rules'. Sort of snapshots or echoes? Pinkish ones, or gruff ones?) Or if after dictating again and again a rule of grammar or chess, etc, the rule-wording goes running through my head by rote (like a maddening popular song), is that wording (or any word in it) a 'representation' of the rule—or of any part of it (if rules have parts)? From your review it seems that Fodor beats Locke in the intricacy of his 'wires-and-pulleys', when what was chiefly wrong with Locke was the (intermittent) intricacy of his 'wires-and-pulleys'!

When a new piece of music was 'just coming' to Mozart he hummed the notes. Presumably he was then sometimes dissatisfied and scrapped some note-sequences. What were *these* unwanted 'representations' of? And were the wanted ones *representations* of the notes he wanted—or just the *notes he wanted*? And if he hummed some of them only in his head? Or some under his breath?

In brief, I'm not persuaded that Fodor's book is *about* anything. It certainly seems not to be about (what interests *me*) thinking (= pondering, *trying* to get somewhere, being perplexed, baffled, stimulated, etc etc.) Such thinking is precisely *not* giving oneself '*information*.' It's what one does, often in vain, when one is, e.g., *without* the wanted information. It's hunting, not swallowing; it fails or *sometimes* succeeds. Moreover, in trying to solve (prove, classify, 'place' . . . something), I may, *but may not*, be saying things to myself, or to you. *Not* (necessarily or usually) if I'm trying to find the right hole for this jigsaw puzzle piece; to compose a tune; to spot the dragon in the puzzle picture; to read a map; to identify which are *my* spectacles; to find misprints (if any). (The 'proprietary inner code' of your p5 seems to be dispensable sometimes, so when *not*?) Even if I'm doing plenty of 'wording' (aloud or under my breath or in my head or all together), these words, phrases, etc., may be just candidates *on appro*; for inclusion in—else for exclusion from—the naughty Limerick that I'm trying to compose. Information? Pshaw! And what of the 'wording' that I do when running over my now completed Limerick, in order to get it by heart? For now I'm not even word-hunting but only word-*practising*. Or I might be teaching *you* how my Limerick goes. Are the words, etc., so didactically imparted *not* 'representations' (because not 'internal')? then what of the words internally *practised* or *rehearsed* by me for memorisation? Not 'representations' *although* 'internal', because only by rote? What of 'half by rote'?

'Cognitive psychology' sounds to me like the later days of phlogiston-theory! It looks

as if F (or? DD!) take unexamined some bogus notion of ‘*internal*’ and *then* excogitate hypotheses about the ways in which postulated things, happenings, etc in this ‘internal’ region can go proxy for things, happenings etc not in this internal region—at least not in my private one. (And what good are proxies?) But if ‘internal’ is just a metaphor, denoting things, events, etc. which are non-‘external’ simply because merely *imagined-as-heard-seen-uttered-etc* etc., then the plural noun ‘internal representations’ either denotes nothing, or else can be used to denote some familiar, interesting, but pretty peripheral things—not what ‘cognitive psychology’ could live off! And how could you (despite the Law of Effect paper [“Why The Law of Effect Will Not Go Away”]), apparently, condone the ‘grotto’ (Cartesian) interpretation of ‘mental’? (‘Mentalese’-ugh!). When Mozart was audibly and tentatively humming a new note-sequence, did his ‘mental’ intentions, tastes, ingenuities, patience, *ennuis*, dodges, inventiveness, tactical and strategic savvy, etc. etc *not* get exercised merely because (careless chap!) he was humming aloud and not as-if-humming in his head? Or can ‘mental’ cover things that are overt? And then does ‘Mentalese’ cover your and my chattings in English, calculating on the backs of envelopes, frowning, scratching our heads, toying with clay? (Incidentally, the idea of Fodor that we each do, or might, have our private “Mentaleses” (which Locke mildly rejects) *is* what L.W.’s ‘private languages’ offensive was an offensive on, though L.W. surely did not know his Locke. Knowing Russell would have been enough. Or his Fodor. But we are now in 1976!

I think I—unprejudicedly!—applaud all your vindications of the *C of M* against Fodor, as well as your occasional headshakings. At least I never sank to speaking of ‘the language of thought’ as if this was an ‘internal’ analogue to my South Country English! Any counterparts to slang? or to commas?

2. Your ‘Law of Effect’ paper is really powerful and new. It’s going to take their ‘Nothing-But . . .’ away from the Reductionists and their ‘Something Else as Well’ away from the Duplicationists/Transcendentalists. But I’m going to go one better than Valéry. We need: 1) *making up combinations* (--experimentation, having a shot, trying out, being bold or silly, taking a risk, ‘generation’); 2) *selection*—testing (including destruction-tests), being wary or circumspect, paying insurance premiums, looking out for troubles, *not* being silly, consulting the compass, etc. But we also need 3):—*consolidating*, practising, going over and over, rehearsing, taking drill—so that we can finally do without (or without much) more 1) *thinking* up, or 2) *thinking* over, what our experiments-plus-tests have taught us. Indeed, they haven’t *taught* us anything until we have taken in the lesson—i.e., made a full or near *tropism* out of our previous novel Risk-plus-Precaution-Taking. Getting familiarised is a higher-level tropism. A lot of what Newton (or Plato or . . .) said to themselves had to be not *novelties* but things now or still needing to *become hackneyed*. An original dictum is not ‘a thought’ until it is domesticated. A double-checked experiment is not a discovery or invention until *repetition* has set in. Meno’s slave-boy has not mastered Pythagoras’ Theorem until he can move from it, with it, back to it, behind it, etc. Nor have you mastered your new golf-niblick after your first stroke with it—not until you can, so to speak, wield it ‘in your sleep.’ My new Limerick is not mine until it comes off my tongue when I’m *not* still composing. The explorer has 1) to desert the beaten track; 2) to examine his new whereabouts for smaller morasses, testse-fly . . . ; and 3) to make well-beaten tracks out of some of his earlier tentative trails—this last in order, maybe, to get him to still virgin jungle

a bit further ahead. So my Trinity is:- 1) *Hunting*; 2) *Corralling*; 3) *Domesticating* or:
1) Being *rash*; 2) Being *wary*; 3) Being *used to , or being at home in.*

Notice that what it took a Newton to 1) hunt & 2) capture, can then be 3) inculcated into comparative dullards—and then (anyhow fragmentarily) into machines. Non-pioneers can tropistically saunter along the newly beaten tracks through the jungle. They aren't 'pioneering'—but nor is Newton himself 'pioneering' nowadays when he too takes his morning strolls along these tracks—e.g. when he is lecturing to students on his *Principia*; or vetting a French translation of them; or proof-correcting for a new edition. These are not new moves in *Physics*.

The counterpart to *Learning is Teaching*. To teach involves 1) *introducing* pupils to something new to them; 2) *examining* them in the new lesson; 3) *habituating* them in it—*drill*. Finding-things-out-for-oneself is *self-teaching*, and its task is incomplete until the self-teacher has completed his *self-drilling*. Three *homunculi!*—well! three strands of one cable (separately tuggable, cuttable and going, quite likely, with different qualities of character and wits. 1) reckless, rash, impatient, versatile, on his toes, etc; 2) shrewd, cautious, painstaking, suspicious, defensive, ungrullible, etc; 3) Docile, patient, sedulous, industrious, retentive, reliable, absorbent, etc. But one *Homo* can be in high degree & must be in *some* degree, synchronously or successively, a bit of 1), a bit of 2), & a bit of 3).

We tend to be rather snifty about 3). No glory there! And *of course* there is no glory in the mere daily *using* of what had once had to be gloriously invented and then distinguishedly tested, emended, reference-checked, etc. etc. No glory in our remaining for 50 years in secure possession of the glorious Pythagorean Theorem! No glory in just being a settler in what would still be a Terra Incognita but for the glorious restlessness of x & y & z .

The question Does it pay to become sure-footed (ready, responsive. . .) & to become so quickly & to stay so for a long time, etc? answers itself. To be 100% *un-*familiarized with water, cows, English words, constructions & intonations. . . would be to be infantile or retarded.

3. I've less to say about your third piece ["Toward a Cognitive Theory of Consciousness"]. Your engineering and especially your 'engineering-theory' are too far ahead of me. One point, though. On your p2, p30 line 8, & elsewhere you seem to tie down the (cardinal) question about consciousness to trivialities about our 'inner lives'. But if 'inner' means only 'imaged' (like my 'kappa' that is *as-if*-said in my head, as distinct from my shouted or whispered 'kappa') then I am conscious only *inter alia* of what I *fancy* I see, hear, feel, do, etc. I am conscious as well of what I really *do* shout, whisper, gaze at, attempt, intend, resent, etc. I can usually answer *instanter* virtually incorrigibly questions about what I am not or have just been *saying*, in what tone of voice (why in such a cross tone of voice) etc., & ditto for what I *do* (*non-unwittingly*, of course), how I feel, where I am off to, etc, etc. Consciousness, as even Descartes himself *ordinarily* described it, is not imprisoned inside a private cell.

But *perhaps* 'inner life' for you just *equates* with what is done by the adverbs

'consciously', 'wittingly' 'guiltily' etc., & has no special tie to what now and then goes on 'in my head'. I hope so—but 'I hae ma doots'.

Enclosed is a recent piece of mine. It's on innovation-cum-insurance & *not* on familiarization. Give my love to Susan & tell her that her Dan is first-rate.

Yrs,

Gilbert

© Dan Dennett and the Estate of Gilbert Ryle, printed with kind permission from The Principal, Fellows and Scholars of Hertford College in The University of Oxford.

EJAP is a non-profit entity. EJAP may not be printed, forwarded, or otherwise distributed for any reasons other than personal use. Do not post EJAP on public bulletin boards of any kind; use pointers and links instead. EJAP retains the right to continuously print all the articles it accepts, but all other rights return to the author upon publication.

EJAP is hosted at The University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Please send comments and questions to ejap@louisiana.edu.